

Middle Grades Spotlight

A Periodical for California's Middle Grades Educators

Spring 2006

Theme

Small Learning Communities

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A Message from the Superintendent

In the business arena and the world of politics, we hear over and over again that "it's all about relationships." But that adage can also be applied to the field of education. The multitude and complexity of relationships—among students, teachers, administrators, parents—form impressions on our children that can last a lifetime.

Although relationships are significant throughout the educational life of children, it is during early adolescence, particularly during the middle grades years, that children experience a heightened need for close connections with adults. During this same period of time, most students are moving from the familiar and intimate environment of elementary school to the larger, more socially complex world of middle school.

Recent and emerging research confirms what many already know—that close relationships with teachers are critical to academic success for students in the middle grades. To that end middle schools throughout California and the nation are finding ways to create student-centered learning environments that respond to the intellectual, social, and psychological needs of young adolescents.

Among the approaches being adopted by middle schools is the formation of grade-level, content-area, and interdisciplinary teams to engage students and promote strong relationships with teachers who are seen as adult mentors. Known as "small learning communities" in the current high school reform movement, these teams have been present in middle schools for years. The four schools featured in this issue—McKinleyville, R. H. Dana, Toby Johnson, and Gaspar de Portola—which were all recently designated as Schools to Watch—Taking Center Stage model schools, show how the team approach is succeeding in today's middle schools.

The California Department of Education applauds the efforts of the four 2006 Schools to Watch—Taking Center Stage schools and the high-quality educational experiences they provide. Their strategies and approaches are excellent examples of education at its best. These model schools are not only promoting student academic success, but are also helping to nurture their students to become responsible and productive members of society. And they are doing it by affirming that it is, indeed, "all about relationships."

JACK O'CONNELL

About This Issue

Welcome to the spring 2006 *Middle Grades Spotlight*! The theme of this edition is “smaller learning communities” and the ways in which they foster positive school relationships for students.

The middle school years are a critical period in the development of our children. The academic, social, emotional, and ethical values shaped during this age will carry into adulthood and have lifelong effects. With teams and smaller learning communities, middle schools are being transformed from confusing, sometimes frightening, and impersonal places to environments where students feel safe, cared about, and deeply connected to others.

The lead article, “Some Big Ideas About Smaller Learning Communities,” is written by Rose Owens-West, Senior Project Director at WestEd. Dr. Owens-West also acts as director of the Regional Smaller Learning Communities Technical Assistance Center serving California, Nevada, and Arizona. Dr. Owens-West has worked extensively with the California Department of Education (CDE) on technical assistance projects related to the implementation of Title I of the No Child Left Behind Act for major California school districts, such as San Francisco and Los Angeles, as well as rural districts in the northernmost part of the state. The article, which discusses common smaller learning community configurations and key ideas for effective implementation, is based on her work and research on smaller learning community programs.

Although smaller learning communities have recently come to be associated with high school, this concept has been part of the middle school reform agenda since publication of *Caught in the Middle* (1987), the report of the Superintendent’s Middle Grade Task Force. Research sponsored by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development and included in *Caught in the Middle* studied programs of “exemplary schools” that were effective in the education of early adolescents. Findings showed that 90 percent of those schools had organized teachers and students into interdisciplinary teams (*Caught in the Middle*, p. 100).

Taking Center Stage (2001) identifies and defines three types of team structure models—the chronological team, the cooperative team, and the interdisciplinary team. The chronological team is defined as having two or more teachers with different subject matter specializations who share the same students but teach in different classrooms. The cooperative team is one in which teachers may plan together but allocate time and organize instruction within a block schedule rather than focus on interdisciplinary connections. The interdisciplinary team involves two or more teachers with separate subject matter specializations who have the same students in a common block of time.

The instructional objective of interdisciplinary team teaching is to take content from different subjects and focus on a specific topic or theme from diverse viewpoints. This type of team teaching is linked to the development of students’ higher-order thinking skills and complex reasoning. In addition to promoting positive academic and school-connection experiences for students, interdisciplinary teaming also allows more flexibility in planning and implementing programs as well as more mentoring opportunities for teachers (*Taking Center Stage*, pp. 131–132).

This edition also highlights practices at the four designated 2006 Schools to Watch—Taking Center Stage model schools. At McKinleyville, see the strong connections between students and teachers of

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different disciplines. At Richard Henry Dana, discover how sixth-grade students experience a gradual transition during the first year of middle school guided by experienced and caring core teachers. At Toby Johnson, learn about “looping” and how it enables students to establish and maintain close relationships with teachers. Finally, at Gaspar de Portola—although not structured as a smaller learning community such as the other three schools—find out how all students receive a curriculum that not only emphasizes deep understanding of concepts and development of essential skills but is tied to real-world learning.

“Technology as a Tool to Save Time, Promote Professional Development, and Build Community” features the Technology Information Center for Administrative Leadership (TICAL), an education portal that is one of the four educational technology services provided free by the CDE. Administrators will be especially interested in the matrix that contains relevant, administrator-reviewed, and selected resources. If you want information about funding for technology, professional development for digital school leadership, or easily accessible resources related to a variety of topics such as data-driven decision making, No Child Left Behind, or technology planning—this is the site for you!

The article on counseling provides a preview of the new *California Results-Based School Counseling and Student Support Guidelines*, which has a developmental design and focus on prevention. These guidelines, to be published in fall 2006, reflect a paradigm shift from the traditional service-oriented approach. Find out how these guidelines support the professional school counselor’s role in smaller learning communities.

Last, the “Worth a Click” page supports this edition’s theme by providing links to relevant sites. There is no need to search further to find Web sites that provide information about implementation assistance for smaller learning communities!



Some Big Ideas About Smaller Learning Communities

Today, any discussion of improving middle and high schools includes references to smaller learning communities (SLCs). The traditional large, comprehensive high school, often referred to as the “factory-model” school, is considered by many to be outdated and ineffective.¹ Implementing SLCs is one strategy for addressing the issues of fragmentation, limited teacher collaboration, and lack of focus that characterize traditional schools, whether they be high schools or middle schools.²

What, then, is a smaller learning community? Although there are many models of implementing SLCs, the distinctions among them are frequently unclear because their variety is as individual as the districts and schools in which they are housed. The definitions of small learning communities range from units that supplement a school’s departments to those that are entirely separate schools sharing a common physical location.³ Kathleen Cotton synthesized the literature on smaller learning communities and provided the following definition. Generally, a SLC is any separately defined, individualized learning unit within a larger school setting. Students and teachers are scheduled together and frequently share a specific location within the school. Common SLC configurations found in both high schools and middle schools include the following:⁴



In small learning communities, students and teachers frequently share a specific location within the school.

- House Plans
 - Students and teachers are assigned to smaller groups.
 - Students share courses and teachers.
 - Students are usually organized by grade level.
 - Sometimes groups are organized vertically with two or more grade levels.
- Career Academies
 - The focus is on a broad occupational area.
 - Teachers and students choose to be members.
 - Schools may choose both school-based and work-based learning experiences.
- Pathways, Pods, or Cluster
 - Sequenced career-related and academic courses toward graduation are provided.
 - Students are sometimes scheduled together.
 - Teachers form a team for interdisciplinary instruction.

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¹ Darling-Hammond, Linda. *Factory-Model Schools*. School Redesign Network.

<http://www.schoolredesign.net/srn/server.php?idx=242> (accessed June 29, 2005).

² *Taking Center Stage*. Sacramento: California Department of Education, 2001, Chapter 7.

³ Raywid, M. A. “Taking Stock: The Movement to Create Mini-schools, Schools-within-Schools, and Separate Small Schools.” New York: ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1996.

⁴ Cotton, Kathleen. *New Small Learning Communities: Findings from Recent Literature*. Portland, Ore.: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 2001.

Career Clusters or Pathways

- The focus is on broad-based industry areas from technical to professional levels.
 - The work focus is integrated with a focus on high academic skills.
 - Students are organized according to career goals and interests.
- Advisories
 - The focus is on the social, emotional, and intellectual development of students.
 - Teachers provide students with continuous adult guidance and support with their peer group.

In addition to these configurations, there are the various “school” structures: the school-within-a-school, autonomous small school, mini-school, charter, magnet, alternative, multiplex, and theme-based school. The distinctions among these various structures include their mission, instructional focus, admissions policies, physical location, and relationship, if any, to a larger school.⁵

“ . . . it is critical to establish that size and structure alone do not provide a magical solution for improving middle and high schools.”

A discussion of SLCs, by definition, starts with a focus on size and structure. However, it is critical to establish that size and structure alone do not provide a magical solution for improving middle and high school levels. Successful school transformation into SLCs should begin with the acknowledgment that small size alone does not automatically yield success. “What small size does is to provide an optimal setting for high-quality schooling to take place. It facilitates the use of organizational arrangements and instructional methods that lead to a more positive school climate and higher student learning.”⁶

Key Ideas

There are key ideas that need to be emphasized regarding effective implementation of SLCs. For the past 30 years, researchers have developed literature describing the characteristics of schools that successfully undertake comprehensive school reform. Twenty-five years of research have been conducted on the efficacy of small schools and SLCs. From studies of schools undergoing reform, we now understand what schools need to do and have in place in order to implement significant and lasting change.

The first key idea is that effective schools and SLCs have, as their foundation, a focus on teaching and learning. To be effective, the SLC must improve student achievement. The primary impetus for conversion must be to increase the academic performance of *all* students, not simply create new learning environments.

The second key idea about effective implementation of SLCs is that certain conditions must exist within the school before the transformation can take place. Linda Darling-Hammond, in her work with high school redesign, identified the following characteristics as necessary for high schools wanting to convert into SLCs:⁷

- A focus on student achievement
- A culture of collaboration
- The engagement of all stakeholders
- The willingness of the staff to change

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⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Cotton, Kathleen. *New Small Learning Communities: Findings from Recent Literature*. Portland, Ore.: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 2001, p. 17.

⁷ Darling-Hammond, Linda. *Factory-Model Schools*. School Redesign Network. <http://www.schoolredesign.net/srn/server.php?idx=242> (accessed June 29, 2005).

- The skill of the leaders in the school
- The staff's knowledge and use of data-driven decision making

These characteristics hold true for middle school teams as well.

These fundamental characteristics translate into a school's shared vision, willingness, and capacity to change.⁸ In WestEd's work with SLCs, we discovered that schools with those characteristics as preexisting conditions more effectively implement their SLCs. They were better able to envision a different type of school for themselves and their students, to agree on the goal of high academic achievement for all students, and to transform the school. Moreover, they already had a common understanding of what it would take to meet that goal and were well established in working collaboratively.

The last key idea to be addressed in this article is that schools transforming into SLCs must reorder their priorities and reallocate their resources to support the SLCs. Reordering priorities means staff must make decisions to change the depth and breadth of the curriculum, reduce their extracurricular offerings, and use their time differently. They also examine and revise their priorities about staff roles and responsibilities, redefining the jobs of administrators and teachers. We have seen that in successful SLCs, staff members rethink and reallocate all of their available resources to support their changed priorities. In sum, SLC implementation requires reallocating resources to:

- Allow flexible student grouping and scheduling to meet students' needs.
- Offer varied blocks of instructional time to improve teaching and learning.
- Effectively utilize common planning time.
- Provide time for professional development time.

“We have seen that in successful SLCs, staff members rethink and reallocate all of their available resources to support their changed priorities.”

In conclusion, what constitutes success for implementing SLCs cannot be separated from what constitutes success for middle and high schools. Successful transformation into SLCs means conducting the business of schooling for adolescent learners differently.

Photo credit: Photo of California Middle School, Sacramento, California; photo taken from school's Web site.

By Rose Owens-West

Rose Owens-West is the director of the Regional Smaller Learning Communities Technical Assistance Center, WestEd.

⁸ Berman, Paul, and others. *Readiness of Low-Performing Schools for Comprehensive Reform*. Emeryville, Calif.: RPP International, 2000.

Gaspar de Portola Middle School

Sustaining a Dynamic Student-Centered Culture

Gaspar de Portola Middle School
San Diego County
San Diego Unified School District
11010 Clairemont Mesa Boulevard
San Diego, CA 92124-1507
Elizabeth Gillingham, Principal
(858) 496-8080

2005 School Profile

Community: Large City/Urban

Enrollment: 1,036

Student Demographics:

- 13% African American
- 1% American Indian/Alaskan Native
- 8% Asian
- 3% Filipino
- 27% Hispanic/Latino
- 1% Pacific Islander
- 47% White

Grade Levels: 6-8

2005 [API](#): 811 (up 36 points since 2001-02)

2005 [AYP](#): Yes*

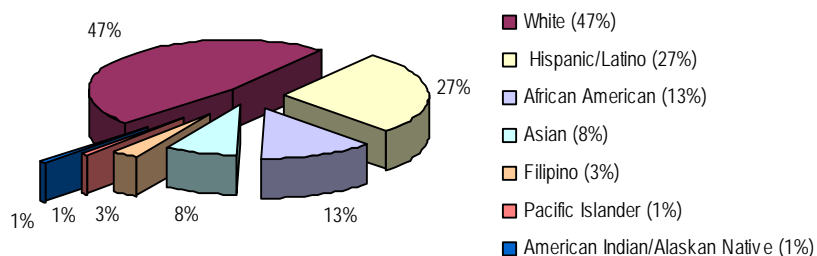
Free/Reduced Lunch: 31%

English Learners: 8%

* School met 25 of its 25 criteria for making adequate yearly progress (AYP).

“ACEing it up!” has become Gaspar de Portola Middle School’s mantra, helping teachers and students understand that high-level thinking skills are to be applied in all content areas. Students should be “Analyzing, Critiquing, and Evaluating” (in other words, “ACEing”) each lesson and topic to reach higher-order thinking skills.

Gaspar de Portola Demographics



Smaller Learning Communities

Sixth-grade students are placed in core English and social studies classes with the same teacher in order to make a gradual transition into the middle school environment. Half of the day is spent in those core classes, allowing teachers a chance to create a warm and caring environment with a small group of students. First period is used to build a strong school community by starting each day with a reading of the Panther Creed. Three affirmation statements provide students with a positive outlook for the day and emphasize how important they are as people.

Created by common interest, school clubs provide students with opportunities to work with other teachers they may not meet in their schedule. The clubs provide students with an enriching social environment according to students’ interests in sports, culture, religion, academics, games, and safety.

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The school creates a personalized environment that supports each student's intellectual, ethical, social, and physical development. Students are given a challenging curriculum to meet their needs.

Meeting the Needs of Students

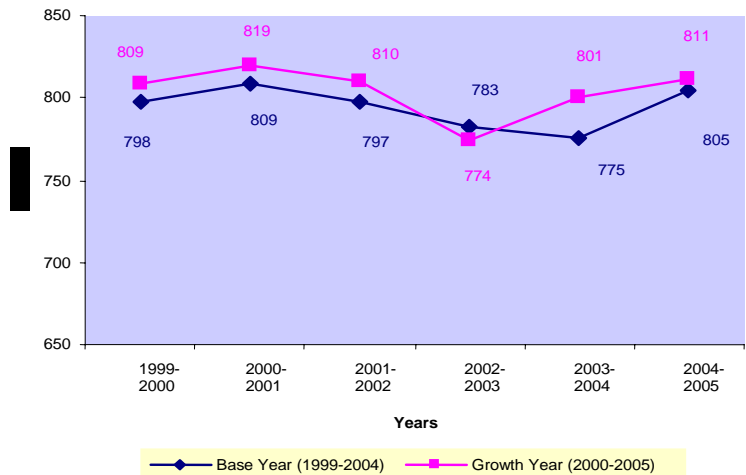
At de Portola, students receive support to meet the school's rigorous academic standards. Every teacher posts a class agenda or essential question for the day, tied to standards, to help students understand the goals and objectives for the lesson. In English and math, parallel support classes are designed to allow students access to a more rigorous program. An extended-day program is offered after school for students to work on basic skills in math and reading activities in English. Targeted tutoring on specific skills and concepts is available through the math department, and any interested student may participate.

All teachers are aware of the needs of their special education students and those with Section 504 plans. In addition, teachers are given rosters with California Standards Test (CST) and Degrees of Reading Power (DRP) scores to help determine their students' needs when they plan lessons. Students requiring assistance in meeting standards are also given support through programs such as Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) and six-to-six tutoring and from special education resource teachers and teacher assistants.

De Portola's library media center is the heart of the campus. Students are reading on sofas, browsing stacks, and typing on computer keyboards. The center is available to students and their families every weekday, beginning 70 minutes before school until 30 minutes after school. The library/media center strives to meet the diverse needs of all students, including those with learning disabilities and physical challenges.

The school provides multiple opportunities for students to explore a rich variety of topics and interests to maintain a dynamic student-centered culture. De Portola provides a late bus so that students not living in the neighborhood can participate in the after-school drama class, the six-to-six program, sports teams, and other activities.

**Gaspar de Portola
API Trend**



“Students are placed in the most rigorous schedule they can manage and supports are in place to help them succeed.”

Overview of the School

In 2003, Gaspar de Portola Middle School was named a California Distinguished School, earning the distinction as an outstanding school serving the needs of a diverse population. All students attending de Portola are expected to meet high academic standards. Students are placed in the most rigorous schedule they can manage and supports are in place to help them succeed.

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A strong emphasis is placed on the four core subjects: mathematics, English, science, and social studies. Extra funds are used to support two-hour blocks of English in sixth grade and parallel support classes for math and English in seventh and eighth grades.

The curriculum at de Portola emphasizes a deep understanding of important concepts, development of essential skills, and the ability to apply what one has learned to real-world problems. As a direct result of these efforts, de Portola's Academic Performance Index (API) has steadily risen over the last three years.

All lessons are student-centered and require students to do the thinking while teachers act as facilitators of learning. The librarian plays a key role in collaboration between all subject areas, helping teachers find current research articles that directly support their lessons.

Advice to Other Schools

The key to building a successful school lies in creating a collaborative working relationship between teachers and the administrative team that is built around a common commitment toward a continuous improvement model. Analyzing data also affirms that change is important and makes it easier to see where students are excelling and which areas need stronger efforts.

De Portola works because it functions as a true team. Coaching is given through peer observations and the lesson study process as well as through staff development and administrative involvement in the classrooms. The school knows its strengths and continues to work on getting better results from students each year.



Student-centered learning requires students to do the thinking while teachers act as facilitators.

It is impossible to build a strong team when teachers do not feel they have support when they need it. De Portola's administrative team monitors struggling students by meeting with them weekly to discuss their commitment toward their education. If a student is disruptive in class, there is a system that holds them accountable. As a result, the teacher can spend time on instruction and not on negative behaviors in the classroom.

Finally, there has to be a tie with parents at the school. Building strong community involvement further promotes the idea to students that education is important and valued by everyone involved in the process. This gentle push to have everyone invested in making a school an outstanding educational and social experience for students is what makes Gaspar de Portola Middle School successful in meeting its goals and community expectations.

Photo credit: CDE, Middle & High School Improvement Office; photo release on file.

McKinleyville Middle School

Three-Period Core Block Fosters the Learning Community

McKinleyville Middle School
Humboldt County
McKinleyville Union Elementary School District
2285 Central Avenue
McKinleyville, CA 95519-3685
Douglas Oliveira, Principal
(707) 839-1508

2005 School Profile

Community: Small Town/Rural

Enrollment: 434

Student Demographics:

- 2% African American
- 13% American Indian/Alaskan Native
- 7% Hispanic/Latino
- 76% White
- 2% Other

Grade Levels: 6-8

2005 [API](#): 785 (up 82 points since 2001-02)

2005 [AYP](#): Yes*

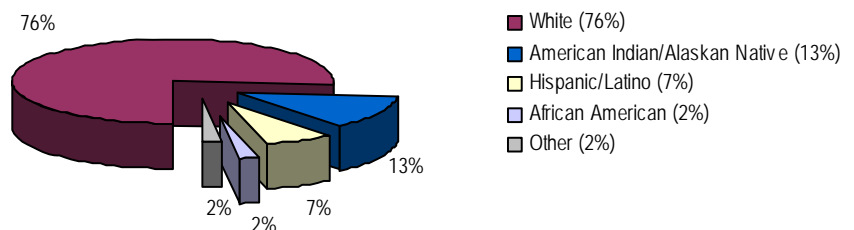
Free/Reduced Lunch: 35%

English Learners: 0%

* School met 13 of its 13 criteria for making adequate yearly progress (AYP).

McKinleyville Middle School (MMS) staff believes that a critical issue in making positive change in a collaborative environment is a shared understanding that “We will make decisions and changes based on what’s best for kids” and “We will support each other” so you may comfortably, “Check your ego at the door.”

McKinleyville Demographics



Smaller Learning Communities

The school builds a small learning community for groups of students and teachers by incorporating a three-period core in which students have the same teacher for reading, language arts, and social studies. This system is coupled with the advantage of departmentalization for math, science, physical education, and elective courses to round out a complete educational program to meet students' individual needs.

Another opportunity to create small learning communities is in the school's academic support classes, after-school and Saturday School tutorial programs, and McKinleyville's "Pyramid" after-school

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intervention program for students identified as being at risk of retention. These learning environments are restricted to a maximum of eight to 12 students to make optimal use of the teacher-student connection and focus on the individual's academic needs.

A third opportunity for the development of a small learning community is fostered through student support programs for social development. There are friendship groups in which students are assigned based on social need and the Opportunity Program, an alternative learning setting critical for academic success.

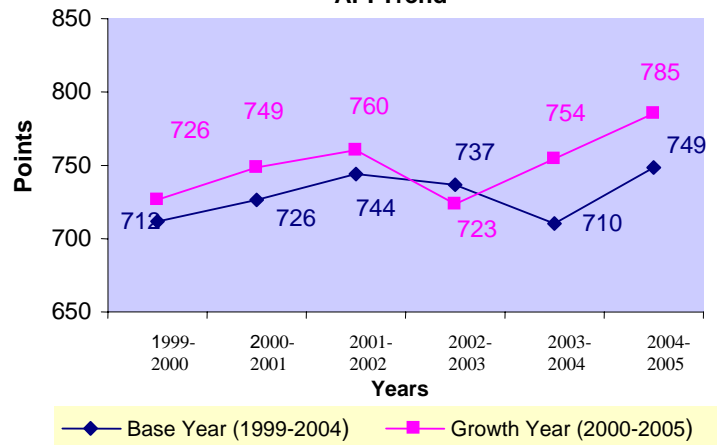
Meeting the Needs of Students

MMS implements numerous programs to support students with special needs and abilities. A high level of collaboration exists between support programs and general education. MMS serves as a leadership site through its participation in the California Services for Technical Assistance and Training (CalSTAT) program which promotes innovative collaborative strategies that assist special education student with success in the regular education curriculum. Students in the as Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) program have their academic needs met in a variety of ways: differentiated instruction, cooperative learning groups, curriculum projects, and through academic contests and competitions. The *Gifted and Talented Education Plan* ensures that the majority of instruction for gifted students is part of the normal school day.

Innovative, research-based instructional strategies foster curiosity, exploration, and creativity in students. Technology is seamlessly woven into the academic program. Teachers are continually evaluating themselves to improve instruction and student learning through collaboration and sharing of strategies.

Students are regularly involved in their own learning, assisting in development of rubrics for curricular area assessments, and monitoring their own progress in meeting state curriculum standards. Student-led parent-teacher conferences are held twice each school year on a trimester schedule. During the conferences students formally report on their academic achievement, personal skills, and conduct to their parents. Additionally, teachers regularly discuss student progress with parents and students in writing, by e-mail, by telephone, and, increasingly, by Edline, an online resource enabling parents to access weekly assignments and triweekly progress reports.

**McKinleyville
API Trend**



“Innovative, research-based instructional strategies foster curiosity, exploration, and creativity in students.”

MMS has many support systems in place for students. In addition to teachers and instructional paraprofessionals, the school has responsive counseling staff providing support programs that are available to all students. An outreach program (in partnership with a community resource center) provides clothing and food free of charge, parenting classes, an after-school tutorial program, and academic Saturday School. Other services include peer conflict mediation, character education, and antibullying programs.

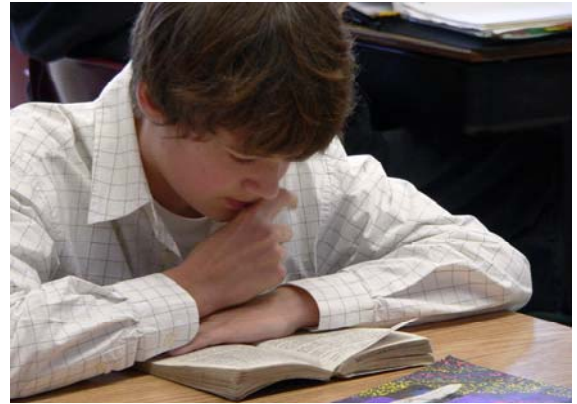
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Overview of the School

McKinleyville Middle School is located on California's north coast, a diverse rural setting at the edge of the Pacific Ocean surrounded by mountains and forests of towering redwoods. MMS has a proud history dating back to 1872. The current middle school configuration was created in 1998. It is common to have students whose parents and grandparents also attended the school. With an enrollment of approximately 400, MMS is large enough to offer an exceptional educational program but small enough that each student is known on an individual basis.

The school embraces a true middle school philosophy reflecting the recommendations of *Taking Center Stage*. Extensive student support services, a three-period social studies/language arts "core," and departmentalized math, science, and physical education courses serve as the foundation. The curriculum is enhanced by a wide variety of cocurricular offerings and extracurricular activities.

The mainstays of the MMS program are collaboration and student support. The school administration empowers teachers, community members, parents, and students in the decision-making process regarding classroom practices and school policy. Paths of articulation and communication are open among MMS staff, the K-5 schools, and the high school district. Grade-level core teachers and other teachers are members of two teams—curriculum teams that share a common area of curriculum prep and grade-level teams. Common prep time allows teams to align curriculum and assessments, review data, and coordinate student intervention strategies. Grade-level teams meet weekly to discuss student concerns and successes and cross-curricular activities as well as align dates for major projects and assessments. The entire staff comes together at least once each month to discuss schoolwide issues, celebrate successes, and articulate curricular practices and goals.



MMS is large enough to offer an exceptional educational program but small enough that each student is known on an individual basis

Advice to Other Schools

As research bears out, quality time for collaboration within teams and as a whole staff is crucial to making schoolwide and systemic changes and improving the learning opportunities for all students. Small changes grow success over time. Most, if not all, of McKinleyville's successful systemic changes came by trying an idea with willing participants and staff who supported each other as the change progressed. Staff commitment to embrace a decision after reaching general consensus is also necessary. Commitment is more readily possible when staff members make a concerted effort to support each other through the process of change.

Above all, having fun as a staff is important in spite of the overwhelming challenges of today's educational environment. Schools must create opportunities to bond as a staff and celebrate small successes. McKinleyville dedicates a portion of each staff meeting to "Comet Star" presentations (the school's mascot is a comet). Staff members recognize each other's successes and thank colleagues for assistance or for just being who they are. It is the best and often most productive five minutes of every staff meeting at McKinleyville.

Photo credit: CDE, Middle & High School Improvement Office; photo release on file.

Richard Henry Dana Middle School

Teaming Builds an Unwavering Commitment to Achievement

Richard Henry Dana Middle School
Los Angeles County
Wiseburn Elementary School District
13500 Aviation Boulevard
Hawthorne, CA 90250
Matthew Wunder, Principal
(310) 643-6165

2005 School Profile

Community: Urban Fringe/Suburban

Enrollment: 763

Student Demographics:

- 18% African American
- 4% Asian
- 3% Filipino
- 55% Hispanic/Latino
- 2% Pacific Islander
- 17% White
- 1% Other

Grade Levels: 6-8

2005 [API](#): 767 (up 69 points since 2001-02)

2005 [AYP](#): Yes*

Free/Reduced Lunch: 42%

* School met 21 of its 21 criteria for making adequate yearly progress (AYP).

An emphasis on school-to-family communication and teacher teaming focuses school efforts when programs at Richard Henry (R. H.) Dana Middle School are developed and implemented.

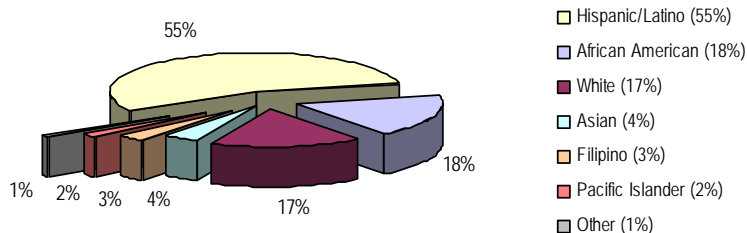
Smaller Learning Communities

Maintaining a small learning community relies on Dana Middle School's unwavering commitment to a schedule and clear and regular communication among staff focused on student achievement and safety.

Vital to the school's success as a small learning community is the **schoolwide master plan**, which offers teamed configuration and block scheduling. The master schedule is developed with the faculty's ideas and provides regular opportunities for teachers to discuss individual student needs, successful classroom management techniques, and effective teaching strategies. Class size is capped at 30 students for sixth grade and 33 students for seventh and eighth grades.

Organized and regularly **scheduled meeting time** affords ample opportunities for clear communication and effective planning at Dana. The staff meets as a whole group, either in curriculum

R. H. Dana
Demographics



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committees or by grade level, to work and plan collaboratively, share educational and classroom practices, analyze student work, review student progress toward state standards, and reach consensus about discipline, program evaluation, and school operations.

In the fall, curricular teams meet and design yearly instructional plans. These plans are reviewed and modified throughout the year to best meet the needs of students. In scheduled language arts and math team meetings, teachers plan lessons using adopted state standards-based instructional materials and discuss classroom practices and specific student needs.

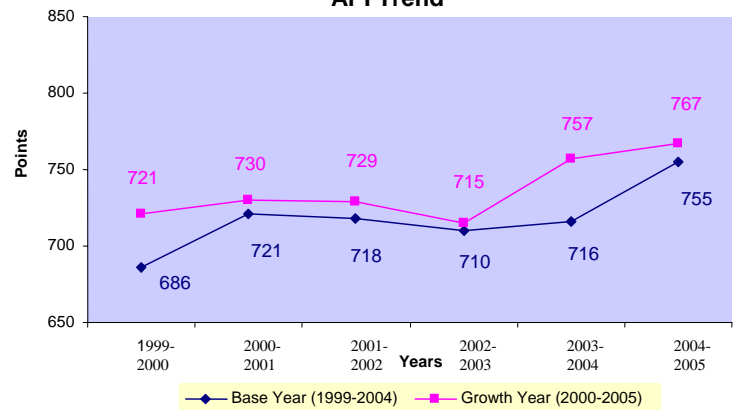
Consistent articulation across grade levels further supports Dana as a small learning community in which teachers know their students and work continuously to ensure their success. Articulation across grade levels (grades six to eight) occurs during regularly scheduled department meetings. Formal articulation occurs between fifth- and sixth-grade teachers in the spring to prepare students for a successful transition into middle school. Articulation with high schools occurs in many formal and informal ways (e.g., district elementary and high school articulation meetings).

Meeting the Needs of Students

Dana Middle School's **organizational structure** reflects the unique needs of the middle school student and provides an environment that supports each student's intellectual, ethical, social, and physical development.

Gradual transition begins in the sixth grade. There are four teams of two academic core teachers who share a common planning period, an exploratory elective wheel, and a physical education class. This structure provides students with age-appropriate small learning communities. In the seventh and eighth grades, a natural teaming environment is in place. Students remain in a core for humanities (language and social studies) and move to individual subject classes (mathematics, science, and physical education).

**R.H. Dana
API Trend**



“Consistently, teachers and students . . . make connections across disciplines that support learning and reinforce important concepts and real-world problems.”

To foster the development of close and mutually respectful relationships and to provide for individual needs and careful follow-up, each student's homeroom teacher/adviser coordinates family communication, including teacher team conferences. Homeroom teachers review the grades, standardized tests scores, and current reading levels of their students and initiate Student Success Team meetings when necessary.

A full-time counselor works directly with families and coordinates a conflict resolution program. To meet the growing social and emotional concerns of middle school students, the school developed a peer mediator

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program. Resource staff or counseling staff or both train teachers to recognize students with problems and give support during an annual in-service.

Teachers plan together a variety of effective instructional strategies, such as project-based learning, flexible grouping, Internet research, and discovery learning. Consistently, teachers and students at Dana Middle School make connections across disciplines that support learning and reinforce important concepts and real-world problems. Students and parents have multiple opportunities to express themselves in the academic environment.

In addition to the rigorous core curriculum, all students have access to exploratory and elective classes. For students from ethnic and socioeconomic groups that are typically underrepresented in higher education, Dana Middle School also implements Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID), a successful, research-proven program to provide instructional support and mentoring.

Overview of the School

Richard Henry Dana Middle School is located just a few miles southeast of Los Angeles International Airport in the Wiseburn Elementary School District. With a current population of nearly 800 students (sixth, seventh, and eighth grades), Dana Middle School is a suburban school with urban characteristics.

Dana Middle School is a hub of opportunity and activity. Its community of professionals reflects an unparalleled work ethic. The staff continuously strives to ensure the success of all students as evidenced by the numerous staff members who can be found on campus well into the evening collaborating with colleagues, reviewing student work, and planning lessons.

The student-centered and cooperative environment places students and their achievement above all else. Student success has been made possible at Dana Middle School by the collaboration of all members of the school's community. As Phil Condit, chief executive officer of Boeing, said, "None of us is as smart as all of us."

Advice to Other Schools

Because teachers do the "heavy lifting" every day, schools must strive to build structures that reduce teachers' stress and acknowledge hard work without placing teachers in competition with one another. Examples include the use of "peer poaching" as instructors visit each other's classes to gain appreciation of one another's work and ideas for their own lessons. Shared lunch periods offer ample opportunities

for informal professional sharing. The school's Peer Assistance and Review (PAR) program also enables first- and second-year teachers the opportunity to work closely with a mentor teacher and gain constant information and assistance throughout the year.



The schoolwide master plan is vital to the school's success as a small learning community.

The school looks very carefully at its teaming partners at each grade level, matching teachers who will easily complement one another in a collaborative manner. The teaming partners, combined with clear and consistent communication through organized and regularly scheduled meetings, has helped ensure the forward motion of Dana in program development and student achievement.

Photo credit: CDE, Middle & High School Improvement Office; photo release on file.

Toby Johnson Middle School

Interdisciplinary Teams and Looping

Help Build a Caring Community

Toby Johnson Middle School
 Sacramento County
 Elk Grove Unified School District
 10099 Franklin High Road
 Elk Grove, CA 95758
 Patrick McDougall, Principal
 (916) 714-8181

2005 School Profile

Community: Urban Fringe/Suburban

Enrollment: 1,484

Student Demographics:

- 15% African American
- 1% American Indian/Alaskan Native
- 18% Asian
- 8% Filipino
- 17% Hispanic/Latino
- 1% Pacific Islander
- 40% White

Grade Levels: 7-8

2005 [API](#): 823 (up 41 points since 2003-04)

2005 [AYP](#): Yes*

Free/Reduced Lunch: 18%

English Learners: 7%

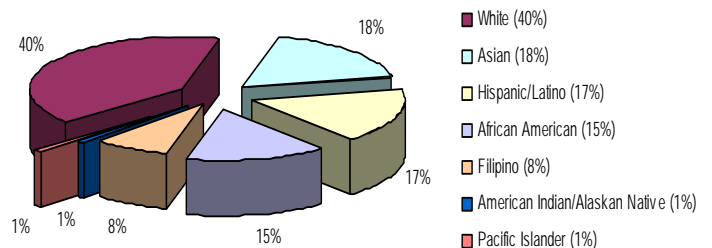
* School met 33 of its 33 criteria for making adequate yearly progress (AYP).

Toby Johnson Middle School, located in the Elk Grove Unified School District, shares an address with Franklin High School to provide the community with an articulated program in grades seven to twelve.

Smaller Learning Communities

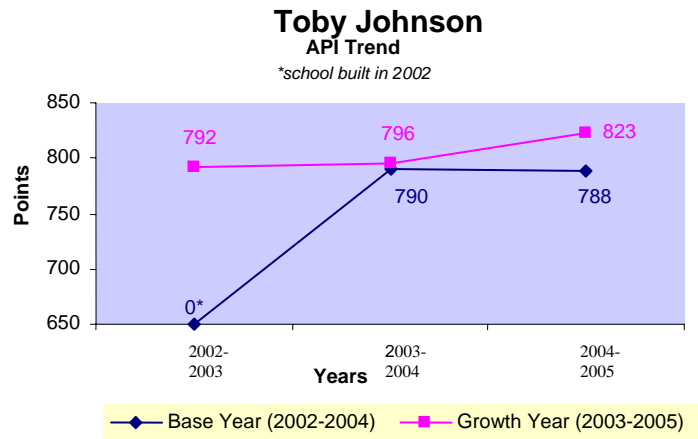
The concept of smaller learning communities is incorporated into Toby Johnson Middle School in two ways. First, the school's current organizational structure features the interdisciplinary team concept, which produces a sense of smallness on campus. Teachers stay with their students for both seventh and eighth grades. This process, known as "looping," ensures that over a two-year period students and parents work with the same set of teachers. Teachers work together to make certain that the curriculum is carefully sequenced and not repetitive. The needs of students are met in a timely fashion. Teachers know all students by name and make sure their unique needs are met.

Toby Johnson
Demographics



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Within each team there is a second organizational feature—the cohort model—that produces a sense of community and sustains the school’s smaller learning communities. The cohort model allows groups of 35 students to travel together—within the team—during the course of the school day. For example, a particular group of students might have math together in first period, travel together to a second-period science class, then move to a third-period humanities class. When students leave their team and travel to elective classes, the cohort is disbanded and students from all the teams are intermingled. Teachers and staff at Toby Johnson believe that this structure is an excellent tool for helping students make the transition from elementary to middle school.



Meeting the Needs of Students

Each team offers all programs provided on campus, which allows for great flexibility in meeting the needs of students. One teacher serves as team leader to ensure that the team has the tools it needs to change schedules, conduct parent conferences, obtain access to counseling and administrative support services, and modify the academic program to customize each student’s schedule. Every student on campus has a class-and-a-half focused on math and language arts. These extra instructional minutes go a long way toward supporting the needs of students. In addition, after-school support classes augment activities that occur during the normal school day.

Both Toby Johnson Middle School and the adjacent Franklin High School operate from a common Statement of Beliefs, Guiding Principles, and Expected Schoolwide Learning Results. This commonality fosters consistency across teachers and disciplines as well as grounding the students in the transferable skills that are expected in the adult world. In addition, each site uses a synchronized four-by-four block schedule. The middle school students have access to various high school electives

“Staff of high-performing, high-impact schools understands that a school’s entire delivery system must be designed around the needs of young adolescent students.”

and advanced classes that are not usually offered to seventh and eighth graders. The block schedule has been carefully adapted to maximize instructional minutes for mathematics and language arts. The schedule allows Toby Johnson students to take eight classes over the course of the school year.

The instructional strategies are designed to be engaging and developmentally appropriate. In core classes, students work on long-term projects, participate in debates and historical simulations, conduct hands-on science experiments, work in cooperative groups, engage in community service, and solve real-world

problems. In elective classes, students learn new languages, explore art, expand their public speaking and leadership skills, write newspapers, create yearbooks and video productions, play musical instruments, sing, cook, produce plays, and solve crimes.

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Overview of the School

Located in Elk Grove, in the heart of California's booming Central Valley, Toby Johnson Middle School opened its doors in the fall of 2002. Population growth for the city exceeds 10 percent annually and has won Elk Grove the distinction of being the nation's second fastest-growing city among those over 100,000 in population. The school serves nearly 1,500 students in seventh and eighth grade and is only the second site in the Elk Grove Unified School District that shares a campus with a neighboring high school. The two campuses are situated on opposite ends of the property with a community library as a connecting point in the middle.

The school is divided into seven interdisciplinary teams. Teachers on each team work with students in both grades. Each team is named after a local university and consists of approximately 210 students and six teachers—two in humanities and one each in science, math, and physical education, plus a reading-math “bridge” teacher.

Advice to Other Schools

Staff of high-performing, high-impact schools understands that a school's entire delivery system must be designed around the needs of young adolescent students. Once a stable and well-designed system is in place, administrators and teachers can go to work ensuring that the academic program is rigorous and structures are in place to meet the needs of struggling students. No one single program or organizational structure can fix a school. Administrators and teachers must research best-practice strategies and use that information to synchronize all the aspects of a school. Patience is a must; transforming a school's organization structure into a high performing system takes time, typically three to five years.



In elective classes, students learn new languages, explore art, write newspapers, create video productions, play musical instruments, sing, cook, produce plays, and solve crimes.

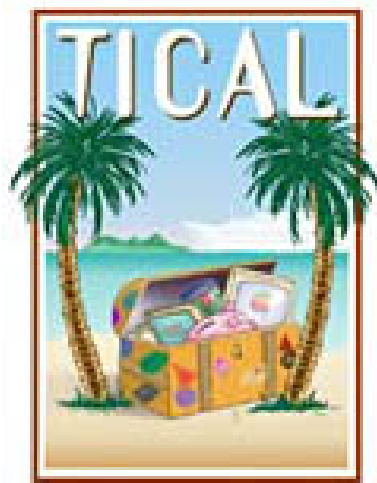
Photo credit: CDE, Middle & High School Improvement Office; photo release on file.

Technology as a Tool to Save Time, Promote Professional Development, and Build Community

The California Department of Education (CDE) has funded four Statewide Education Technology Services (SETS) to provide information and resources free of charge to California's teachers, administrators, and school technical professionals. One of these services, designed for California administrators, is the Technology Information Center for Administrative Leadership (TICAL). [TICAL](#) offers focused, relevant resources that support technology integration to improve teaching and learning, timely information, and electronic forums that invite targeted discussions from the education community.

Technology Information Center for Administrative Leadership (TICAL)

"TICAL is one of the best sites on the Web," insists Gene Arnold, director of Technology, for Siskiyou County Office of Education. "I use it all the time as a source of content for professional development that our office provides to our teachers and administrators. The time saved is used to assist teachers and administrators in using technology as a tool to teach standards to students."



Arnold shared that TICAL's classroom observation tool for handheld devices was featured at the Siskiyou County Office of Education's Superintendents' Leadership Academy. The presentation has led to more focused classroom observations by administrators and has also generated classroom observation tool use among teachers, who see the benefit of collaboration to support student achievement. "The site's Breeze and PowerPoint presentations are especially useful for demonstrating how to integrate technology into the curriculum," said Arnold. "Students benefit when administrators know what effective curriculum/ technology integration looks like and how it can be used to support teaching and learning. Administrators are the ones that make technology happen for schools."

Professional development is conducted through a series of workshops provided by TICAL cadre members throughout the state as well as through online presentations and discussion groups on the project's Web site. TICAL also maintains a Web portal that features hundreds of resources that have been reviewed and recommended by practicing administrators to assist with digital school leadership. The Web portal is frequently augmented with current content that provides just-in-time assistance for administrators.

Recently, the [California Middle Grades Partnership Network](#) (CMGPN) established threaded discussions on [TICAL's electronic forum](#) to continue and extend the collaboration opportunities between face-to-face meetings. Participants can share information, ideas, Web links, materials, and presentations through the forum as part of a professional learning community. Although all users can browse the forum, only registered users may contribute; however, registration is easy and free of

charge. A recent posting invited CMGPN members to provide ideas for the working draft of *Taking Center Stage, Act II*, the newest publication being developed by the CDE. This publication will provide guidance and recommendations to assist California's educators in successfully implementing standards-based education and closing the achievement gap for middle grades students.

TICAL is funded through the CDE and administered through the Santa Cruz County Office of Education. The service provides electronic resources focused on digital school leadership for education administrators in the areas of:

- Data-driven decision making
- Integrating technology into standards-based curriculum

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- Technology planning
- Professional development needs of staff
- Financial planning for technology
- Operations and maintenance.

In April 2004, as part of the evaluation process for TICAL, administrators such as Arnold were surveyed through an online format. The purpose of the survey was to determine how TICAL assisted administrators in their work and how it benefited their schools and districts. Results indicated that TICAL was very useful and assisted administrators most by saving them time, linking them to high-quality technology resources, and helping with technology planning. In addition, administrators use the site for professional development, data-driven decision making, and personal productivity.

Data gathered for the evaluation report indicated approximately 7,000 unique TICAL users. TICAL users indicated that the site saved them, on average, 15 to 30 minutes per month. Some users report time savings of 60 minutes or more per month. Based on an average California administrator salary of \$50 per hour, the savings in time generated from using the TICAL site would be more than \$200,000 per month or over \$2 million per year. The time saved can be dedicated to working with the schools and districts to raise student achievement.

The project's value and ease of scalability has already allowed for successful implementation in Arkansas, with other states currently showing an interest in incorporating the project for their administrators. The relevance of the administrator-reviewed and selected resources on the portal, the ease of navigation, and the access to pertinent content, such as the Enhancing Education through Technology and No Child Left Behind information, have been especially useful.

Education technology is a powerful tool that can be used to motivate and engage students in the learning process. Effective professional development, especially for site and district administrators, can help ensure that technology integration is systemically embedded in the learning environment to make a positive impact on teaching and learning and close the achievement gap for students. Administrative leadership and support to ensure that technology is available and effectively utilized is crucial to successful, sustained implementation.

TICAL was recently recognized by the U.S. Department of Education as an example of a [leadership success story](#). More information on TICAL may be obtained by contacting the project director, Michael Simkins, at (831) 477-5501, or by e-mail at msimkins@portical.org.

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U.S. Department of Education. 2004. National Education Technology Plan: *Toward a New Golden Age in American Education*.

Technology Information Center for Administrative Leadership (TICAL) Annual Report, prepared by the Center for Educational Planning, Santa Clara County Office of Education, San Jose (2004).

By Joyce Hinkson

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School Counseling: Improving the Lives of California Youths in the Twenty-First Century

To meet the growing demand for outcome-based programs, the California Department of Education (CDE) is updating its previous school counseling guidelines by creating the *California Results-Based School Counseling and Student Support Guidelines*. The anticipated completion of the guidelines is fall 2006.

One of the important goals of the CDE in publishing the *California Results-Based School Counseling and Student Support Guidelines* is to create a quality document that represents the academic, career, and personal/social needs of students. The guidelines will provide direction and assistance to counselors, students, professionals, parents, teachers, and members of the community throughout California.

High stakes testing and greater demands on schools and students to demonstrate results make clear the need for counselors to demonstrate accountability as part of their professional responsibility. These guidelines reflect a paradigm shift from a traditional service-oriented counseling approach to a program-oriented counseling approach that is preventive in nature, developmental in design, student-centered, and results-based.

The *California Results-Based School Counseling and Student Support Guidelines* promote building a structured program in which all students receive planned guidance, curriculum that brings together skills for learning (academic), skills for earning (career), and skills for living (personal/social) for all students as well as intentional guidance for those students who need greater assistance. The guidelines serve as a road map to develop a quality school counseling program that is based on the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) national model.

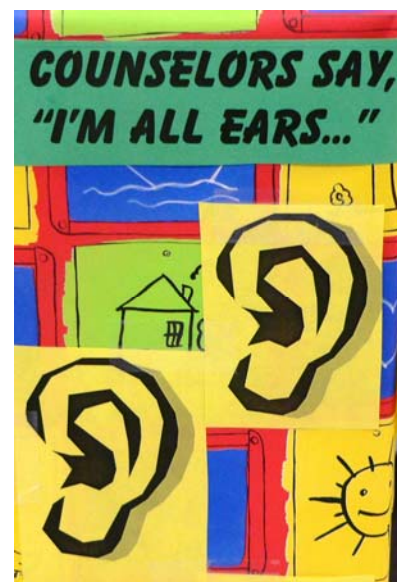
Counseling Within Smaller Learning Communities

As described in ASCA's *National Model: A Framework for School Counseling*, the professional school counselor's role in smaller learning communities is to support data-driven programs that "are built on standards in academic, career and personal/social development."

The new three R's of smaller learning communities—rigor, relevance, and relationships—are integrated within the comprehensive school counseling program in the following manner:

- a) Students will complete school with the academic preparation essential to choose from a wide range of substantial postsecondary options, including college.
- b) Students will understand the relationship between personal qualities, education, training, and the world of work.
- c) Students will acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and interpersonal skills to help them understand and respect themselves and others.

Counselors play a pivotal role in providing programs and services that lead to student success. The benefit of a transformational school counseling and student support approach is that it



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streamlines the implementation process, which creates a data-driven accountability system, and demonstrates counselor effectiveness. It promotes equity and access for all students

and suggests to counselors ways to establish partnerships with administrators and utilize data to drive decision making and create program improvement.

Counselors can use these guidelines to strengthen existing programs or create a foundation for developing new counseling programs. In this way, counselors can partner with other educational leaders

working to design and develop innovative programs to improve student achievement and to provide a system of delivery that will maximize support of the mission of schools and districts statewide.

“High stakes testing and greater demands on schools and students to demonstrate results make clear the need for counselors to demonstrate accountability as part of their professional responsibility.”

Photo credit: CDE, Middle & High School Improvement Office; photo taken at Toby Johnson Middle School.

By George Montgomery

George Montgomery is an Education Programs Consultant with the California Department of Education’s Counseling, Student Support, and Service-Learning Office. He can be reached at (916) 319-0540 or by e-mail at GMontgomery@cde.ca.gov. For more information on counseling and student support resources available from CDE, visit <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/cg>.

Worth a Click

The following Web sites provide additional information on smaller learning communities.

California Department of Education

2005 Distinguished Middle Schools

<http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/lp/vl/dsmidbpslc.asp>

Features California’s 2005 Distinguished Middle Schools that have smaller learning communities to improve teaching and learning.

Coalition of Essential Schools

<http://www.essentialschools.org>

Provides resources for learning more about smaller learning community structures and strategies.

National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform

<http://www.mqforum.org>

Features “Why Small Learning Communities and Small Schools?” the National Forum’s policy statement on small schools and small learning communities (Issue 4, June 2004).

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National League of State Legislatures

<http://www.ncsl.org/programs/employ/slc.htm>

Presents a summary of research results for small learning communities.

Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL)

Small Learning Communities

<http://www.nwrel.org/scpd/sslc>

Highlights the NWREL's Small Learning Communities Web site, a resource for implementing smaller learning communities using the framework outlined in *Small Learning Communities: Implementing and Deepening Practice*.

The Principal's Partnership

<http://www.principalspartnership.com/smalllearning.pdf>

Features a research brief on small learning communities sponsored by Union Pacific Foundation.

School Redesign Network at Stanford University

<http://www.schoolredesign.com>

Provides information about school design, teaching and learning, curriculum, and assessment.

Small Schools Project

www.smallschoolsproject.org

Offers resources for teachers, principals, administrators, parents, and community members who are part of a small school.

Unite L.A.

Small Learning Communities - Small Schools

<http://unitela.com/slc>

Facilitates education and workforce development programs and serves the Los Angeles Unified School District with school-to-career, small schools, and small learning community resources.

U.S. Department of Education

<http://www.ed.gov/programs/slcp/strategies.html>

Provides information from the federal government regarding structures and strategies for creating smaller learning communities.

What Kids Can Do

<http://www.whatkidscando.org/portfoliosmallschools/resources.html>

Features books, curricula, and research about learning and achievement, including information on small schools and small learning communities.

The following portions of the CDE Web site provide additional information on events, funding, and resources of interest to the education community.

CDE Conference Calendar

<http://www.cde.ca.gov/re/ca/cc>

Identifies state and national education conferences and workshops of interest to educators, parents, and students.

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Funding: CDE Administered

<http://www.cde.ca.gov/fg/fo/sf>

Features CDE funding by fiscal year, type, status, topic, keyword(s), or any combination.

Funding: Outside the CDE

<http://www.cde.ca.gov/fg/fo/of/ap>

Highlights state, federal, and other funding opportunities administered by agencies outside the CDE.

Virtual Library

<http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/lp/vl>

Showcases a collection of resources especially for districts with high-priority schools.

Join MidNet—the Middle Grades E-mail List!

Join the CDE Middle Grades e-mail list at <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/gs/mg> to receive notices about middle grades-related information and upcoming *Middle Grades Spotlight* periodical issues.

To view current and past *Middle Grades Spotlight* periodical issues, visit:

<http://www.cde.ca.gov/re/pn/nl/mdlgrdsnwsltrs.asp>

Please send your comments or suggestions to MidNet@cde.ca.gov. Your ideas and suggestions are welcome.

Middle Grades Spotlight

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